RESPECT THE LAW (MGM, 1941) Directed by Joseph Newman; story and screenplay by Edward Dymedale; 20 mins.

With Moroni Olsen, Richard Lane, Frank Orth, William Forrest.

"#3 in the 48 "Crime Does Not Pay" two-reelers made between 1935 and 1947, "Respect the Law" would have had a particularly topical item to run two weeks age, when the case of the phlegmatic blonde who showed up in New York. Since it turned out to be a false alarm, we can now watch this tight little melodrama on its own hard-hitting if definitely unsuitable merits.


With Ruth Chatterton, George Brent, Frank McHugh, Guy Kibbee, Robert Barrat, Ruth Donnelly, Gordon Westcott, Marjorie Gateson, Arthur Vinton, Grant Mitchell, Margaret Seddan, Robert Cavanagh, Catherine Claire, Lucille Ward, Irving Bacon, Guy Usher, Helène Conklin, Gordon deMain, Frank Darien, William V. Mong.

Anybody who is engaged to Gordon Westcott in the first reel of a Warner film can only expect the worst, and within minutes Ruth Chatterton is bigamously married, deceived, pregnant, deserted, her child dead, and more luckey waiting around the corner. It's hard to see what a play as a picture of the pace of the first five minutes is retained throughout, and is told against a constantly moving background of trains, circus caravans and carnival tents. Although there are no signs of either print or negative cuts, this very short film does have a choppy continuity, and would have been easy to cut down prior to release — as probably happened, since neither Mayo Methot nor Mae Busch, officially billed, turn up at all. And the whole thing was in the pre-code "solution" often seems, to have been distilled from possible alternate endings, since nothing really resolved and the various reaction shots between McHugh and Chatterton don't add up at all. However, it's a wild and unpredictable that there's literally never a dull moment and, for me at least, Ruth Chatterton has never been quite so appealing. For once there's a sense of vulnerability beneath the toughness, and thanks to camerawork, lighting and costumes, she also looks unusually attractive this time out. And no doubt the pace was brisk — wellman made me less than eight features in 1933, including "Pisco Jenny", another Chatterton, and "Wild Boys of the Road". Incidentally, the old iron stairway in the back alley that we all knew and love from Warner films, and that we associate most with "42nd Street", puts in another appearance in the climactic reel.

— Ten Minute Intermission —

THE HOUSE ON 56TH STREET (Warner Brothers, 1933) Directed by Robert Florey; screenplay by Austin Parker and Sheridan Gibney, from a story by Joseph V. Garrity, Ernest Haller; dialogue director, William Keighley; edited by Howard Bretherton; 68 mins.


Robert Florey began his prolific association with Warner Brothers in 1933, starting with a rather confused crime melodrama "Girl Missing", moving on to the Bette Davis vehicle "Ek Lady", and winding up the year with the best of the three, this highly stylish soap opera which, incidentally, is a far more elegant looking film than its forerunners from the same year and the same studio. Clearly a derivation of "Madame X" (as were so many tear-jerkers of the early 30's), "The House on 56th Street" is the kind of vehicle one would expect to see Barbara Stanwyck or Ruth Chatterton suffering through rather than Kay Francis. Although no masterpiece, it is nevertheless a fine example of Florey's talent for fashioning silk celluloid out of sow's hokum. For all of its old-fashioned narrative, it has both pace and craftsmanship. It covers a tremendous amount of time and incident in its story-line, and zips along so fast that when it's all over it's hard to realise that Warners and Florey have crammed so much into only a little over an hour. As with "Lily Turner", the possibility exists that the film was cut during or after production to shape it into a slick, short programmer. A whole plot complication involving the hero's aristocratic mother - good for three reels of exposition ever at MGM - is side-stepped by a couple of lines of dialogue and is disposed of almost before it has a chance to come to life. Margaret Lindsay arrives late in the proceedings and almost immediately is reduced from a dewy-eyed debutante to a Jeannette Moorean-ish wreck of a gambling floozie, and yet within, the speed never produces the look of a quickie. The camerawork is polished, and scenes break up into powerful, well-composed close-ups and two-shots. The story, hokey or not, is a pretty good one with a meaty if predictable climax. Kay Francis is beautiful and able once more, but as always - and who ever stood a chance against him? - it is John Halliday who walks away with the role show with the kind of role he could do in his sleep, and who manages to perform as though he'd never heard of type-casting.

— William K. Everson —

Program finishes at approx. 10.25, followed by discussion session.